

IMAGES AS METAPHORS FOR DESIRE

PROBLEM IN LIEU OF THESIS

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

My work in the past few years has been concerned with the juxtaposition of fragmented and/or incongruous images in such a way as to imply a relationship between these images. In the last year the relationships between the objects has evolved from merely being diagrams for a tableaux to being a visual metaphor for an idea or feeling. During this evolution the ideas I wanted to express became more personal; consequently, I decided to use objects that have come to assume personal symbolic significance. The five paintings presented as my problem in lieu of thesis express personal feelings about private relationships. I chose desire as a theme for this group of paintings because it is both a universal and private element in human relationships. My intention was to use personally symbolic images in such a way as to construct a universal symbol or metaphor for desire.

I used oil paint and an acrylic based ground on stretched muslin or canvas as the vehicle for my exploration of combinations of objects as a visual metaphor for desire. Five large scale paintings comprise this body of work. The paintings are various sizes and dimensions. As in earlier paintings I limited the number of images to no more than five images in

each painting. A private catalog of meanings for each combination of images was kept in personal notes. The five paintings and the color transparencies contained in the appendix provide evidence that I have completed the creative portion of this project.

To determine the effectiveness of the combinations of images as metaphors for desire I asked the following questions during the course of my exploration:

1. On what basis were the objects chosen?
2. What are the relationships between and among the images in the paintings?
3. How do these relationships constitute a metaphor for desire?
4. What visual devices influence the relationships between the images?

I considered each of the questions prior to and during the painting of each work. In the following chapter I will discuss the answers to these questions and evaluate the work. My summary and conclusions are in the final chapter.

CHAPTER II

ANALYSIS AND EVALUATION OF PAINTINGS

The images in the paintings come from objects that have appeared in my personal experience. I chose the particular objects because I associate certain images or combinations of images with feelings and thoughts I have about private relationships. At the same time I tried to choose objects that might have associations outside my experience. Some objects were chosen because of associations with attractiveness; others because of their mechanical qualities. In certain circumstances one quality may be more obvious than another.

The oyster image in Oyster Painting (Figure 1) is an example of an object chosen for its multiple associative qualities. I associate oysters with pleasurable sensations such as taste. As a supposed aphrodisiac, the oyster has for centuries been associated with sexual activity. The most obvious association the oyster has with sex is that when it is on the half shell it looks remarkably like female genitalia. In the same painting the diagram of plumbing parts from a box labelled "female couplings" was chosen not only for its mechanical associations; but also for the incongruous notion of ascribing female attributes and sexual qualities to a mechanical object.

Another example of an object with multiple associative qualities is the image of the diagram of the magic illusion cards. I associate this image with ideas of illusions and unrealistic expectations. The images of the figures that appear to be printed on the cards represent cliched notions of attractiveness and unattractiveness.

This body of work expresses my need to understand desire and how it has affected decisions and distorted judgments in regard to private relationships. To understand desire and its influence, I described certain aspects of this feeling. Some of the descriptive aspects of desire are: unrealistic expectations, sexual attractions, illusions, and frustrations. Each image in each painting recalls to my mind one or more of these aspects of desire. For example, the echinoid fossils in the painting You Search for the Perfect Specimen (Figure 2) allude to the idea of unrealistic expectations. Two echinoids appear to be perfect in comparison to a third which appears to be broken or bitten. In reality one might assume the two unbroken fossils to be better specimens. However, personal experience has shown that some broken fossils can be more attractive to find than unbroken fossils.

The dog in the same painting refers to the notion of sexual attraction. This reference is made apparent by the pink stains around the mouth and genitals. Since the dog and echinoids appear in the same painting a relationship is implied. If one assumed the flawed echinoid had been bitten by the dog,

then the echinoids become objects of desire. In this way one could speculate on a number of associations that relate to or evoke the feeling of desire.

The objects are not arbitrarily chosen from a list of objects that have been capriciously assigned various qualities, associations, or symbolic meanings. In fact, as I have stated earlier in this paper, the images in the paintings come from objects that have appeared in private experiences. Each image because of its associations serves to recall a personal situation; the memory of which evokes the emotion of desire. Thus the images take on personal symbolic significance. T. S. Eliot called this device for objectively communicating feeling the objective correlative. He defined the objective correlative as "a set of objects, a situation, a chain of events which shall be the formula of that particular emotion, such that when the external facts, which must terminate in sensory experience, are given, the emotion is immediately evoked" (1, p. 326). I have used the objective correlative visually as a device to construct a visual metaphor for desire. Combining personal images that carry a variety of associations and qualities is my formula for externalizing indirectly the feeling of desire. The combined images epitomize or embody feelings that accompanied personal experiences and thus the paintings become a visual metaphor for desire.

I realize that an uninitiated viewer cannot possibly know my formula for constructing a visual metaphor for desire.

In order for the paintings to have any meaning outside my experience the images would have to communicate in some way some aspects or associations with desire. I felt that some form of speculation would somehow lead the viewer to associate the combined images with qualities or aspects of desire. I have described one way this process of speculation can occur in the painting You Search for the Perfect Specimen (Figure 2). Comparing or contrasting images could be another way to speculate on the relationship of the objects. I chose incongruous images to initiate speculation about the relationship of the objects. As incongruous objects the images will have no relationship outside the context of the paintings. I attempted to invite further speculation with a variety of visual devices.

When two objects appear in a painting a relationship is implied. In order to manipulate the viewer to speculate further about the relationship of the objects, that implied relationship must somehow be negated. In four paintings I have tried to emphasize the incongruity of the objects by physically separating the images. (See Figures 1, 2, 4, and 5). In You Search for the Perfect Specimen (Figure 2), and Fan!--Don't Shake My Martini (Figure 5) the images appear as separate panels like diptychs. The images in Oyster Painting (Figure 1) and Bird and Magic Rings (Figure 4) are separated by hard-edged color grounds.

All the paintings have neutral or cool grounds. The color of the ground can be important in one painting and of little consequence in another. In some paintings the color of the grounds can emphasize or suggest disparities or similarities in the objects. For example, I attempted to set up an analogy between the fading bird and the magic rings (Figure 4) by using analogous colors for grounds for the images. In Oyster Painting (Figure 1) I used what I considered a sweet cool green-blue as the background for the oyster on the half shell and a neutral grey-green as a background for the mechanical parts to emphasize the incongruity of the images. The color backgrounds are used in the same way in the painting You Search for the Perfect Specimen (Figure 2). The choices of colors for the backgrounds in You Don't Measure Up (Figure 3) and Fan!--Don't Shake My Martini (Figure 5) were arbitrary.

The method of painting the images is another visual device. I attempted to paint some of the objects realistically in order to imply qualities such as warmth, animation, or attractiveness. The images that are diagrammatically drawn with black lines were meant to appear more mechanical or less attractive.

I did not strictly adhere to this system of visually manipulating speculation on the part of the viewer in the painting You Don't Measure Up (Figure 3). In this painting the incongruous images appear together in the same panel.

The images of the female figures appear within the image of the diagram of the magic illusion cards. Obviously I did not abandon using separately colored backgrounds for each object as indicated by the reddish-brown cards which serve as a background for the figures.

The obvious differences in the figures are emphasized by the fact that one magic illusion card is actually painted smaller than the other. In real life the cards are the same size. I painted the cards brown so that while the figures appear to be part of the diagram they can function like the other incongruous objects in the other paintings.

Scale was another device in inviting speculation about the relationship between the objects. The large size of the paintings is for visual impact. A four foot oyster is certainly more provocative than a four inch oyster. Size actually has little to do with the relationship between the images or the feelings they evoke. One image is not meant to appear more important than another because of its size.

To construct a visual metaphor for desire, my primary concern was to select and combine a variety of personal images that carry a variety of associations. These images became a formula for expressing or evoking the emotion or feeling of desire. I was also concerned with initiating some means of speculation on the part of the viewer in order for the paintings to have any meaning outside my experiences. I relied on a number of visual devices to initiate and further

speculation about the images. The formula of objects and the visual devices I have used are my process for constructing a visual metaphor for desire.

The most successful uses of the formula of objects for constructing a metaphor for desire are in the paintings Oyster Painting (Figure 1), You Don't Measure Up (Figure 3), and You Search for the Perfect Specimen (Figure 2). Each image, in each of these paintings, can be associated with a variety of ideas or things outside my experience. I am particularly satisfied with the selection of incongruous objects. This is important because my reason for selecting incongruous images was to stimulate speculation about the relationship between the objects.

Bird and Magic Rings (Figure 4) and Fan!--Don't Shake My Martini (Figure 5) are the least successful in my mind because the images I selected have few associations outside my experiences. I am concerned that speculation about the relationship between these objects will go no further than the relationship implied by their appearances on the same surface. Since visual devices are important for inviting speculation about the relationship between the images I am reevaluating some of my decisions. For instance, it occurs to me that I might have used the grounds more efficiently to emphasize the images' differences as well as imply other associations. For example, red because of its associations with warmth or passion might be a better background for the fan and olive image (Figure 5). A sharp visual contrast with the cool neutral

background of the olive and pimento in the same painting might be a better strategy for initiating further speculation between the images.

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CHAPTER III

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

My intention was to use personally symbolic images in such a way as to construct a visual metaphor for desire. I attempted to select images that had personal significance for me, yet communicated a variety of associations outside my experiences. I also attempted to invite speculation about the relationship of the objects by using incongruous images and a variety of visual devices. During the course of this inquiry a formula and strategy for constructing a visual metaphor for desire was articulated.

This project as a whole was fulfilling despite any weaknesses in the paintings. The paintings and this paper have provided me with an articulated system or strategy for visually expressing personal concerns. Heretofore I never attempted to coherently and explain precisely or to understand my process for making art. I feel that in the past year and a half my concerns and ideas changed along with the ability to define goals and formulate strategies for articulating my concerns and ideas.

The strategy I defined in this paper can be expanded or changed to accommodate any idea or feeling. The variations of images and the ideas they evoke seem endless. The most important conclusion I have made as a result of this project

is that I actually do not have to rely on this particular strategy for expressing an idea or feeling. I am able to devise and articulate other methods of visually expressing my feelings in future art work.

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